



Reply to Frapolli

François Recanati

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Reply to Frapolli

I.

When someone says something, he or she expresses a certain content, and knows which content it is that he or she expresses. That is the substance of my 'Availability Principle'. I use it in support of a broadly contextualist approach to linguistic content ; for the content that is delivered compositionally through the semantics of the language, irrespective of pragmatic considerations, is either too incomplete to count as content (in the genuine, truth-evaluable sense), or, if complete, lies at a level of abstraction that makes it unavailable to the users of the language.

As Frapolli notes, four (related) phenomena, or rather, four distinct facets of a single phenomenon — a phenomenon which plays quite a central role in my philosophy of language — seem to give the lie to the Availability principle :

- According to *Externalism* (a view which I accept) the content of our thoughts depends upon the external environment and not merely upon what's 'in the head' of the thinker ; it follows that subjects « do not, in general, 'know' the propositional contents of the representations which they accept » (Recanati 2000 : 275). This apparently contradicts the Availability Principle.
- *Indexicality* is a pervasive feature of both thought and speech, in virtue of which the content of our words and mental representations depends upon the context in which they are tokened. It follows that one may be unaware of what one says or thinks, insofar as the content of one's speech or thought depends upon contextual factors of which one may be unaware.
- Through *quotational deference*, it is possible to use words with the content they have for someone else, even if one does not know what that content is. Thus I may believe what the teacher tells me, namely, that Cicero's prose is full of 'synecdoches', even if I haven't quite understood what synecdoches are.
- Sometimes we speak as if we possessed concepts which we do not actually master but which are part of the intellectual endowment of the community to which we belong. This is the phenomenon known as *imperfect mastery*. Thanks to the social nature of language, we help ourselves to conceptual resources which are beyond our individual ken.

In *Oratio Obliqua*, *Oratio Recta* and elsewhere I pointed out that there is a close connection between quotational deference and incomplete mastery. In both cases, arguably, we defer to other members of the linguistic community. But in quotational deference we defer deliberately and consciously ; no so in the other type of case. In incomplete mastery the subject need not be aware of his or her predicament. The type of deference at issue is more surreptitious and automatic than quotational deference.

There is also a close connection between indexicality and Externalism ; a connection emphasized by Putnam in his pioneering papers on the topic. Like Putnam, I think that Externalism can be construed as the thesis that our concepts have a demonstrative component. 'Water' refers to *that stuff* to be found in lakes and rivers around us (etc.), hence the reference of our water-concept depends upon the environment, much as the reference of a demonstrative does. The stereotype associated with a natural kind term, or whatever fixes the reference of the term for us,

does not do so by providing necessary and sufficient conditions but by enabling us, in context, to identify local paradigms whose real nature is what ultimately determines the extension of the term.

Finally, I hold that deference itself (in its two forms : quotational deference and incomplete mastery) can be viewed as a form of indexicality, broadly construed. When deferentially used, an expression acquires a specific, deferential 'character', in virtue of which it expresses the same 'content', in context, as the content the expression has for the person or persons to whom the speaker defers, given the character that expression has for the person or persons in question. The Kaplanian framework with its distinction between character and content can be used to deal with the facts of deference in a straightforward manner, and it is that indexical treatment which I advocate in my critical discussion of Sperber's views.

The indexical theory of deference enables us to achieve the unification of the four phenomena listed above. As I said at the beginning, they are best construed as facets of a single phenomenon. Yet there are differences between the facets, and they loom large when it comes to evaluating the alleged inconsistency between (due recognition of) the multi-faceted phenomenon of context-dependence and the Availability Principle.

II.

Regarding the connection between Externalism and indexicality, Frapolli sides with Burge who, in 'Other Bodies', downplays the connection emphasized by Putnam. Although I side with Putnam in this debate, I concede that there is an important difference between, say, natural kind or substance concepts ('water', 'tiger') and ordinary demonstrative concepts ('that water', 'that tiger').¹ This difference I have tried to cash out in terms of the distinction between the *normal context* in which a concept acquires its content and the *actual context* in which the concept is used and applied. The reference of a natural kind or substance concept depends upon the normal context (so 'water' does not refer to the same thing for us and for the inhabitants of Twin-Earth), while the reference of an ordinary demonstrative concept depends upon the actual context (so 'that tiger' refers to different tigers in different contexts). The actual context is much more local than the normal context. The normal context is the world in which we live and with which we causally interact ; while the actual context is the local situation (a small chunk of the world) in which the concept happens to be tokened.

This difference in locality matters greatly to the issue at hand. For us, the normal context is given: we live on Earth (where H₂O is what descends from the sky as rain, etc.) hence our concepts have whatever content they have, in a more or less stable manner. The environment-dependence of content has no practical consequence for us because the external factors upon which content depends do not change (except in the counterfactual circumstances imagined by the philosophers). Only their actual variation would be a threat to Availability, because it would entail that a change of content might not be detected by the subject. Since the external factors do not actually vary, there is no undetected variability of content, hence no

¹ I say 'ordinary demonstrative concepts' because natural kind concepts can themselves be construed as demonstrative concepts referring to properties (the property of being water, the property of being a tiger) or to substances or kinds (*water, tiger*).

threat to Availability.

To be sure, there is a sense in which subjects can be said not to 'know' the propositional contents of the representations which they accept, since those contents depend upon environmental factors of which they need not be aware ; but there is *also* a clear sense in which they do know the contents of their beliefs. Contextualists in epistemology have emphasized how variable the conditions of satisfaction of 'know' are according to the changing standards which happen to be set in context. Just as there is no real contradiction between Everyman's claim to knowledge and the philosopher's scepticism, there is no contradiction between the externalist's claim that subjects do not know the contents of the representations they accept, and the Availability principle, according to which they know the contents of the beliefs they express by their assertions.

III.

The relative stability of content which makes Externalism consistent with Availability is due to the non-local character of the normal context on which content externalistically depends. This is in contrast to the actual context of tokening, on which the content of ordinary demonstrative thoughts depends ; for that context is local and eminently variable. I say 'That tiger is tamed' but unbeknown to be, the context has changed : the tiger I was looking at and thought I was pointing to (Marius, say) has been replaced by another, untamed one (Totor). Unwittingly, I say that Totor is tamed. In this case I am mistaken as to the content expressed by my own words. (I think I am referring to Marius, while I am referring to Totor.) Because the context upon which the content of our ordinary indexical thoughts depends is a local context, there is a real possibility of being mistaken as to the content of our own thoughts ; hence there is a stronger sense in which we do not know the contents of our thoughts, than the sense in which that is so simply in virtue of Externalism.

Ordinary indexicality, therefore, poses a genuine threat to Availability. With deference the situation is even worse. Whenever the speaker defers to someone else in her use of a term, what content she turns out to express depends upon what is in the head of those people to whom she defers. The deferrer herself is not in control, by definition : only the deferee, or someone who can read the deferee's mind, knows what is being said. Deference and Availability therefore stand in sharp conflict, as Frapolli points out.

To get out of the contradiction spotted by Frapolli, what can I do or say ? As Frapolli herself suggests, I can appeal to an innovation introduced in *Literal Meaning* in order to qualify the Availability Principle and make it more accurate. The alleged counterexamples to Availability are cases in which, admittedly, the subject does not quite know the content of what s/he is saying ; yet they are not really counterexamples to the Availability Principle, as it is formulated in *Literal Meaning*. There I say that the content of our utterances is fixed by the intuitions of *normal interpreters*. The speaker's intentions etc. fix the content of his or her utterance — a content which must therefore be available to him or her — only insofar as the speaker, in the context, counts as a 'normal interpreter'. This proviso is sufficient to dispose of the counterexamples to Availability based on deference or indexicality. Normal interpreters are, by definition, people who know the language (they understand the words that are used) and the relevant contextual facts (e.g. they do not commit indexical errors such as mistaking the person or thing pointed to for someone or something else). By thus restricting Availability to normal interpreters, we

get rid of the alleged counterexamples :

Ordinary users of the language are normal interpreters, in most situations. They know the relevant facts and have the relevant abilities. But there are situations... where the actual users make mistakes and are not normal interpreters. In such situations their interpretations do not fix what is said. To determine what is said, we need to look at the interpretation which a normal interpreter would give. (*Literal Meaning*, p. 20).

After considering this way out, Frapolli notes that my framework, as it stands, cannot accommodate it. According to Externalism, imperfect mastery permeates language and thought. That is something I accept. Now I hold that imperfect mastery is a form of deference. If, therefore, I assume that deferrers are not normal interpreters, so that Availability fails for them, then I am bound to accept that 'the availability principle fails for the most part of our use of language' — hardly a welcome consequence ! In order to avoid that consequence, Frapolli says, I must change the framework and 'treat apart deferentiality and imperfect mastery'.

Frapolli's objection is well-taken ; there is a problem indeed. But the problem has a solution (close to what she herself suggests). Remember the distinction between the normal context, whose stability makes Externalism compatible with Availability, and the local context upon which the content of indexical thoughts (or utterances) depends. That distinction applies within the realm of deference. For we may consider, with Putnam and Burge, that the normal context (the environment) upon which content externalistically depends has a social dimension. The content of the word 'arthritis', whoever uses it, depends upon the linguistic practice of the community : that practice is an aspect of the normal context upon which the content of the word 'arthritis' depends. Insofar as the normal context (with its social dimension) is stable, that form of deference — the form which permeates language and thought — does not threaten Availability. The only genuine threat to Availability comes from the cases in which the target of the speaker's act of deference is local and variable, namely the cases of quotational deference. In quotational deference, as opposed to incomplete mastery, the actual context of the tokening determines who, in particular, the speaker is deferring to (e.g. the teacher, in the synecdoche example). Now those cases are sufficiently marginal to be excluded from the application of the Availability Principle, without making it vacuous. In contrast, we should not exclude cases of incomplete mastery from its application. When I say that speakers normally know what it is that they are saying, I mean that they know it in a sense that is compatible with the fact that, because of social externalism and imperfect mastery, virtually no one really 'knows' what he is talking about. Again there are different standards for knowledge, hence there is no real incompatibility between imperfect mastery and Availability, appearances notwithstanding.

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